

I may not be a librarian, but I'm running the school library: Understanding the work identity of library paraprofessionals

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Abstract

Work identity is defined as ones' sense of purpose, value and belonging in the workplace (Saayman & Crafford, 2011). It is a useful construct in which to investigate how identities are influenced and developed through personal characteristics, relationships, and work activities. This study sought to understand the ways in which school library paraprofessionals' work identities are formed. Seven library paraprofessionals in Alberta, Canada were interviewed as to their experiences working in a school library. It was discovered that, despite experiencing some misconceptions about their ability, sometimes feeling disconnected with others in the school and lacking a voice to direct their own work, these paraprofessionals experienced a sense of purpose, value and belonging at work. This study demonstrates that even if library paraprofessionals are not qualified Teacher-Librarians, they still are deeply committed to making a difference in the lives of young students.

Keywords: *library paraprofessional, library technician, school library, work identity*

Introduction

Work is an inescapable part of life for most individuals. We spend a significant amount of time engaged in work activities and developing relationships with the people we work with. Research shows that work influences our sense of self and can bring meaning to our lives (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010). A work identity forms as we internalize those work experiences and that identity is strengthened when we have positive relations with others and a sense of purpose and value in the work we do (Saayman & Crafford, 2011). How work identity is formed within the context of school library staff has not been studied and in particular, there has been no attention paid to the experiences and identity of school library paraprofessionals.

This study seeks to understand the ways in which school library paraprofessionals' work identities are formed. Seven library paraprofessionals in Alberta, Canada were interviewed as to their experiences working in a school library, which was part of a larger, collective case study of school, academic, and public library paraprofessionals (also known in Canada as library technicians). The study asked the question: In what ways are library paraprofessionals' work identities formed? Specifically examined

were the formative events in the paraprofessionals' lives that drew them to work in a school library; the paraprofessionals' relationships with students, teachers, and administrative staff; and the roles and responsibilities of library paraprofessionals in a school library.

Review of the Literature

Background to the library paraprofessional

In school libraries, as well as other forms of libraries such as public and academic, the library paraprofessional role is increasing in responsibility and complexity and in some cases, assuming the tasks previously the domain of the professional librarian (Dinkins & Ryan, 2010; James, Shamchuk, & Koch, 2015; Oberg, Mentges, McDermott, & Harusadangkul, 1992). We see this happening in Canadian school libraries where it is becoming common for school libraries to be managed independently by the library paraprofessional. Researchers argue this is due to the changing landscape of the 21st century library, which is moving away from its collections-oriented roots and becoming a socially-focused place of learning, digital technology, and community (Bishop, Cadle, & Grubestic, 2015; Dinkins & Ryan, 2010; Gremmels, 2013; Zhu, 2012). This dynamic library landscape requires competent staff to manage the more complex tasks that accompany this technologically advanced environment, and the greater depth to the work requires more rigorous, formalized training of paraprofessionals with a focus on knowledge-based education (Jacobs & Raju, 2008).

Background to school libraries in Canada

School libraries in Canada have been in crisis mode since at least the early 2000's. Haycock's (2003) report brought to light the decline of the school library in Canada which included elimination of teacher-librarians, severely reduced funding, and a growing perception that the school library was an artefact no longer relevant to education and learning (Haycock, 2003). Ten years after Haycock's report, the Royal Society of Canada (2014) reported on the further decline of school libraries despite evidence connecting school libraries with higher literacy rates and other benefits.

In the midst of this dire outlook, the "learning commons" became a way to reinvigorate the library as the center of learning in the school and regarded as an investment in the future of school libraries (Canadian School Libraries, 2018). The concept of learning commons is a philosophical shift but is also a practical change in how school libraries are viewed and structured. Physically, the space in many schools has changed by reconfiguring the library to an open space, accessible to anyone and without walls. This is not always the case, but the idea being promoted is that the library is an "open learning area with access to technology" (Canadian School Libraries, 2018, para. 8) where collaboration is emphasized and expected. Alberta Education was the first provincial ministry of education to adopt a policy for a learning commons approach; however, the policy does not include recommendations for additional funds for staffing or collections (Hare, 2015). The idea of a learning commons is now a familiar concept in schools and amongst paraprofessionals working in school libraries.

There is no record of the precise number of paraprofessionals working in school libraries in Alberta, Canada, but a 2009 survey reported that out of 1778 K-12 schools, 35% have a library technician (a paraprofessional) or clerk responsible for library service, and 90% of all schools do *not* have a teacher-librarian assigned (Sykes, 2010). That means approximately 620 library paraprofessionals are working in Alberta schools in some capacity at the time of the 2009 study. It is unknown how much that number has changed in almost a decade since the survey data were collected. This background is useful to help contextualize the participants' experiences; particularly, the reconceptualization of school libraries to a learning commons and the reality of being a sole staff member without the benefit of working alongside a teacher-librarian or other dedicated library staff.

Background to work identity

Work identity, simply put, is one's sense of purpose, value and belonging in the workplace (Saayman & Crafford, 2011). This is a relatively new concept within organizational psychology that helps to frame how identities are influenced and developed through personal characteristics, relationships, and work activities (Saayman & Crafford, 2011). The individual is an active participant in the process of constructing identity in the pursuit to answer the question, 'who am I at work?' (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Kirpal, 2004; Saayman & Crafford, 2011).

Individuals, according to work identity theorists, have a stronger sense of value, purpose and belonging when they have a career that matches their personal goals and expectations for work (Jansen & Roodt, 2015). A stronger sense of self and personal fulfillment is possible when work brings meaning and value to one's life (Chalofsky, 2010). While most of the literature on choosing a career in libraries focuses on professional (i.e. Masters' credentialed) librarians, some research applies to paraprofessionals as well. Pragmatic reasons such as having flexible hours and the promise of work/life balance have been said to attract individuals to a career in schools (Walker & Calvert, 2016), but it is the gratifying nature of the work itself that sustains interest in this career. In studies of school library professionals it has been found that there are deep, personal connections to the work; notably, a lifelong passion for books and reading, a connection to the library environment, and a desire to work or help people (Jones, 2010; Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, Vassilakaki, & Tsatsaroni, 2015; Shannon, 2008).

In Simon and Taylor's study of graduate students at library school in Wales (2011), it is emphasized there is more complexity than merely a love of books; there is also a value attachment to books as a conduit to providing information and a sharing with the community. This desire to share and provide information is connected to the other factor these authors discovered which is the desire to help people, an "enjoyment of research and solving problems, aiding learning, and satisfaction at being of help or service to others" (Simon & Taylor, 2011, p. 8809).

The relationships formed at work are a critical factor in establishing a strong work identity. Work identity literature refers to it as social influences; having a sense of connectedness to others gives one a sense of belonging which contributes overall to a stable work identity (Swann, Johnson, & Bosson, 2009). Hogg and Rinella (2018) consider that people are motivated to establish a shared identity as it gives them a strong sense of belonging somewhere. By categorizing ourselves (and others), we "depersonalize perception to create an in-group membership based sense of shared identity and shared reality" (Hogg & Rinella, 2018, p. 6). Shared reality is an inherent desire for people because this is how we validate our beliefs, attitudes, and values (Hogg & Rinella, 2018).

There are a number of parallels that can be drawn between paraprofessionals in library environments and other hierarchically structured workplaces, particularly other types of paraprofessionals who work in schools. The number of paraprofessionals in the classroom is growing, suggesting that this category of worker is something that will be seen more and more in the education field. Irvin, Ingram, Huffman, Mason and Wills' (2018) study mentions there were only 10,000 paraprofessionals (often referred to as educational assistants or paraeducators) in classrooms in the 1960's and this number has risen to over one million as of the date of their article and expected to continue to rise at a growth rate of 8% until 2026. In all likelihood, the number of school library paraprofessionals will increase as well.

Identity issues abound with paraprofessionals in the classroom. Edmond and Hayler's (2013) study acknowledges the need to investigate the identity of the lesser-studied group of teacher assistants, where they experience role ambiguity and role conflict with teachers. They are viewed as "not quite teachers" (Edmond & Hayler, 2013, p. 216) leading to an ambiguous and conflicted identity. Role confusion is a factor because of the increase in numbers of assistants performing more complex duties in the classroom (Trent, 2014). This increase in teaching assistant roles is considered one of the most "profound educational changes" (Trent, 2014, p. 29) in recent years. There are parallels that may be drawn to school library paraprofessionals, who operate in a similar environment and with the same type of hierarchical relationships as teaching assistants.

Methodology

The original study, of which this paper is a part of, explored three types of library workplaces used as cases: school, academic and public libraries. These cases offered a deep investigation into the complex world of library work, made up of the many variables that help to illuminate the perceptions of work identity in library paraprofessionals (Stake, 1995). This paper reports on the findings from school libraries. To examine what shapes work identity of library paraprofessionals working in school libraries, paraprofessionals from the following environments were interviewed: from a large urban school district (serving a population of 500,000 or more), a medium urban/suburban school district (serving a population of 50,000 or more), a small, urban school district and a rural school district (both serving populations of less than 10,000). Experiences varied, from five years to over thirty years working in school libraries. Five of the seven participants had at least some additional post-secondary other than the library technician diploma credential.

Semi-structured interviews with participants were transcribed and coded using NVivo software. Questions were asked regarding their early experiences with libraries and factors that drew them to pursuing a career as a library paraprofessional. A second cluster of questions related to the participants' work activities, and a third set of questions asked about the participants' relationship with people at work. The data were then analyzed by identifying prominent themes from their descriptions of their experiences at work (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). These themes were discussed within the broad categories that make up work identity: personal influences, work relationships, and work activities.

Findings

The emerging themes from the interviews will be described in some detail below and illustrated with select quotes from participants to establish a clear picture of the experiences that shape a library paraprofessional's work identity.

Connection to books and reading

School library participants talked extensively about their love of books, reading and history with libraries as causal factors for what drew them to library work. Several participants who worked in school libraries talked about books and reading as a primary motivator for choosing a library career. The following quotes illustrate this theme.

Veronica: I've always loved books, I've loved helping people with books, I love just being in a library environment ... it was kind of a perfect fit for me, because I love the customer service aspect, and just get to be around books all day.

Anna described the library as one of her "happy places" and wishes she had "gone into library work instead of teaching".

Alicia also had an early connection with books and libraries and described herself as “a voracious reader” and realized “in hindsight it really should have been my career much earlier than it was.”

Helping people

For the school library paraprofessionals interviewed in this study, a passion for helping people was another motivator for choosing a career in libraries. For example:

Jacqueline: “I do love working with people; I just happen to do it in the library world. But if you take the people out of that equation, I would be miserable.”

Paula described how she tried to “have the personal relationships so that people aren’t hesitant to ask me for help”

Linda had a similar perspective, describing herself as “very much a people person. Customer service and communication has always been my real first strong sense.”

Work/Life balance

Many of the school library paraprofessionals also wanted a well-rounded career and wanted a schedule suitable to their lifestyle.

Alicia: “I could definitely see myself in a public library, but the hours and the summers off in a school library, for right now where I am in my life, that just makes the most sense with kids.”

Anna: “You don’t take your job home with you at night or the weekends”.

Jacqueline was previously a teacher and appreciated the shorter hours working as a paraprofessional: “I have loved [my work], I have always loved it and [unlike teachers], when you leave at the end of the day you're done.”

Desire to collaborate and connect with others at work

All participants placed value in having a collaborative work environment. They recognized and accepted that their work was a solo endeavor, which is often the nature of working in a school library. But they described the desire to work as part of the team of the school, including teachers.

Paula (works alone in the library but still felt part of the school staff): “I sort of feel like we're a team. We're in it together and the goal is to help the kids—we all have that same purpose.”

Alicia: “We collaborate a lot [with the teachers]. I really like being able to bounce ideas off of people and say, what do you think of this and they'll be like, oh my gosh, you're crazy. Or that's a great idea. What if we combined that with ... I really love working that way.”

Brenda’s job description specifically mentioned collaborating with teachers. Her job was created, she said, to help establish a connection between the library and the teaching staff. The job description, Brenda explained, is all about “collaborating with the teachers and they wanted somebody that could take their space and turn it into a functioning vibrant learning space.”

Sense of disconnect

While participants described feeling connected with others in the school, they also sometimes experienced a sense of disconnect or exclusion from the rest of the school staff and administration.

Paula: “[The library staff] doesn’t go to the staff meetings, which I think is an issue because you're missing out. I go in and try and find out what's happening in the school and I'm doing a lot of tracking to find out what's going on in the school. Oh, Friday's orange day. What's orange day? That kind of thing.”

Anna told a powerful, hypothetical example of her feelings of disconnect:

“Say, for example, we have a kid that tries to kill themselves and a certain administration will come to me and she will say, this is what's happened. She says it's really terrible and whatever. She said I

know they've got some books outstanding, but she says the family's really fragile right now. Is there any way that you can just waive the fines on that right now ... and I'll say yeah, no problem, we can do that, and then the same thing will happen, but nobody will tell me about it and I'll be sending notices and notices and then I'll get a blistering phone call from the parent. Don't you know what's happened? Haven't you heard? Didn't anybody tell you? And it'll be like no, nobody told me, and I'm the one that's made to look like a total asshole, right?"

Sometimes the lack of collaboration was frustrating, because library staff knew they had something valuable to contribute but no one else seemed to care.

Linda: *"Nobody's asked me that question, do you want to collaborate in this process? Nobody's even asked me that question."*

Participants were also aware a hierarchy existed.

Alicia: *"You'll find in schools sometimes there's that disconnect between the teaching staff and the support staff. There's a bit of a top-down ... it's not unique to our industry ... you find that in a hospital, with a degree nurse, an RN, an LPN and a personal care, right? ... and it's the same thing here"*.

Misconceptions

Participants described misconceptions about what was involved with working in a school library. There was some disconnect between what paraprofessionals envisioned of their library and what others expected.

Brenda: *"A lot of people go in thinking that it's one way and you're just going to be the person behind the desk and I don't even have a desk! You can't be the person behind the desk; you have to be out there a little bit more"*.

Jacqueline (referring to her library): *There's music going in the background, there's kids everywhere, there might be one playing cards in the corner, there's a kid on the computer, there's some reading ... if all it is, is a quiet place where you're signing books in and out, anyone can do that, right? But that's what a lot of people think it is and then they come into mine and they go ... oh!"*

Paula described what people assume of this career: *"for somebody who's timid and wanting that safe environment ... yeah, that's not the place."*

She then described what she viewed as the true nature of the work:

"Any of the positions I've had have been, you know, you end up taking on the role of a counsellor, guidance, you know, because people do open up and talk to you and they're coming exposed. They're looking for information on something very personal".

Voice and agency

Having a voice and agency to design and direct their own work was of utmost importance to these participants.

Veronica described having great support from her school Principal and that this impacted her perspective on work: *"I have opportunities to explore different things to work with in the library and bring in different ideas and equipment and to be able to have fun and explore."*

Brenda described that it took work to develop a voice: *"This is my third year here and this is the year I really feel I'm finally on board, they're onboard with what I'm trying to do, they get that I'm a resource for them and I'm not there to inhibit their job, I'm there to help their job"*.

Paula knew the key was to speak up: *"No matter what library you've been in you really have to promote the services, promote the value because people don't seem to have a real understanding of what a library is, what a technician does. You have to promote yourself"*.

Brenda described a similar perspective: *“I think there's a need there for people that can speak up about [school libraries] and be passionate about it because they're failing. I really feel like there's a spot where I can speak up”*.

Deeper meaning

The participants commented heavily on the deeper meaning their work held. It came up at multiple points in the interview, but largely when talking about the things they looked forward to most after finishing school and what activities and experiences they enjoy the most in their current work.

Alicia: *“Being in a library is really great work ... you're providing a very valuable service to people and—for us in schools, like, we actually contribute to children's success and you know, I've had wonderful conversations with parents about a book that I recommended for their child. Like, I don't know what you did, but now he's reading till 1 o'clock in the morning and I just can't say thank you enough”*.

Paula explained the impact she made on students' lives and the reason she stayed in this career for thirty-five years:

“The kids find it a safe place to come to. We had one guy – this is a few years ago. He was terrified. Been at school for kindergarten, grade one. He was terrified to come into school, wouldn't come in the school. So, I'd meet him every day at the door with a puppet and he even became good friends with that puppet. Then I'd take him down to the classroom and the puppet would stay with him and then we got to a point where he could come and see the puppet in the library when he was feeling insecure. And he graduated from our school last year and he's the most confident kid today”.

Anna spoke about the importance of creating a safe space: *“I also like that for the kids that are just a little bit outside of normal and maybe they're on a degree of the autism spectrum, maybe they're just socially awkward or for whatever reason, I really like it when they come back to see me and they say you were so awesome to me, you made me feel like I belonged here, and that is really something.”*

Discussion

This study provides evidence that school library paraprofessionals have a relatively stable work identity with a positive sense of purpose and belonging at work. However, certain long-standing job hierarchies, historical perceptions of the role of the paraprofessional, and structural workplace limitations inhibit a full realization of some paraprofessionals' potential.

Most school library participants independently managed their library, indicating greater depth and opportunities to paraprofessional work, as suggested by Jacobs and Raju (2008). There is some tension as paraprofessionals assume a new “identity” at work, which involves greater individual agency and ability to direct their own work, while at the same time they fight against misconceptions of what they can contribute. What follows is a discussion within the three constructs of work identity: personal influences, relationships, and work activities.

Personal influences

Library paraprofessionals in this study appear to ascribe to some of the same reasons for pursuing a career in school libraries as professional librarians. School library participants in this study noted their personal interest, and history of, engagement with books, reading and libraries were deciding factors in choosing this career. This is similar to the findings in Jones (2010) and Shannon (2008) where an early, positive experience in libraries was one of the factors that drew participants to a career as a school librarian.

School library participants appreciated the better working conditions compared to prior occupations or experiencing different library work environments. School librarians in other studies had similar reasons for choosing a career in school libraries, appreciating the work hours plus the appealing work/life balance it offered (Jones, 2010; Shannon, 2008; Walker & Calvert, 2016).

Work relationships

The findings suggest that relationships formed at work had a substantial impact in strengthening work identity. In work identity research, relationships - also referred to as social influences - are heavily emphasized and work identity is more solid when the individual feels a sense of connectedness or has “positive relations with valued others” (Swann, et al., 2009, p. 85). The participants in this particular study valued their work connections and viewed everyone in their team as being of equal value, irrespective of job designation or academic qualifications. This affirms Swann, et al.’s (2009) claim that being connected to people at work and establishing strong social connections is as important to people as the economic benefits of working. Participants in this study valued collaboration and connectedness to the extent that for the majority, it is the first thing they mentioned when describing what they enjoy most about their work.

They talked about their work activities not as idiosyncratic activities but as work conducted as part of a team. They value collective work efforts, as demonstrated by statement such as “The goal is to help the kids—we all have that same purpose”. This is an encouraging and positive finding, because it demonstrates that library paraprofessionals’ beliefs, attitudes and perceptions are part of a shared reality with others; this shared reality can strengthen their own social identity (Hogg & Rinella, 2018) and thus contribute to a healthy and strong work identity.

However, despite experiencing some strong social connections, participants also reported a sense of disconnect or inferiority to others in the workplace. A hierarchical work environment and the seemingly arbitrary restrictions on their work frustrate them. This is not an uncommon experience for paraprofessionals in other disciplines, notably, teacher assistants. Studies of teacher assistants also indicate identity confusion because of insecurities between teachers and teacher assistants—the historically superior and subordinate positions lead the way for role ambiguity and role conflict (Edmond & Hayler, 2013; Trent, 2014).

Work activities

The findings from this study suggest a connection between work activities and the construction of a paraprofessional’s work identity. Participants described their jobs as more complex and with greater possibilities than they expected when they first considered this career choice. But they realized that those outside the library, even within the school system, had misconceptions about what was involved in library work and what a library paraprofessional was capable of doing. School library participants emphasized the greater complexities of the role; that they often act as a counsellor or guide and must communicate with a variety of individuals from students to parents to administrators. Most school library participants independently managed their library, indicating greater depth and opportunities as suggested by Jacobs and Raju (2008).

Participants placed a high degree of value on having a voice and the ability to direct their own work. They appreciate when their opinions are acknowledged, as it affirms their role on the front lines as the ones who may be “in the know”. Based on findings from research in similar paraprofessional disciplines, independent decision-making helps one to feel valued and satisfied with one’s work (see, for example,

Bishop, et al., 2015). However conversely, being alone in the decision- making can create uncertainty if one is unsure that they are qualified to make the decision or that their decision will receive support (Downing, et al., 2000). This desire to be heard and for opinions to be respected affirms work identity theorists such as Saayman and Crafford (2011) and Crafford, et al. (2015). They argue that having the opportunity to express one's opinion and to have that opinion validated is a significant motivator to perform better and can increase one's self-esteem at the same time (Crafford, et al., 2015). School library participants described their work as having meaning beyond just performing the day-to-day tasks. School library participants were rich with stories that described meaningful connections with children that gave their work meaning as well. Chalofsky (2010) emphasized the importance of work itself to one's sense of self and personal fulfillment. This applies to any work—not just professional or well-credentialed careers; Saayman and Crafford's (2011) study determined that with manufacturing company workers, they "valued meaningful, challenging and interesting work" (p. 10) indicating one does not have to have a prestigious or more identifiable professional career in order to want it to be meaningful. They were guided by a higher calling without differentiating between their role and others.

Conclusion

The stories shared in the previous section represent some of the experiences of school library paraprofessionals in Alberta, Canada. Despite misconceptions about their capability to run a school library, despite sometimes feeling disconnected with others in the school or lacking a voice or agency to direct their own work, these paraprofessionals were confident and motivated to make a difference in the lives of students and seem to have chosen to overlook some deficiencies to their job. Having a sense of a deeper meaning to their work strengthened their commitment and made them feel part of a bigger purpose. All these things have implications on work identity. It also demonstrates that even if these paraprofessionals are not qualified Teacher-Librarians, they still are deeply committed to making a difference in the lives of young students and ascribe to many of the same motivations as professionals, to follow this career path.

This study has implications for post-secondary education in informing curriculum in paraprofessional programs, particularly with regards to preparing library technicians for work in a school library. This study may also help those in the school library workplace to answer the question, "who am I at work?" with self- assurance and with pride in their contributions. The results of this study may prompt conversation amongst school administration and staff about workplace culture, the importance of cultivating relationships, and the specific role of the library paraprofessional with regards to the learning commons model. The ultimate goal from this research is that the school library paraprofessional is recognized as a valued and meaningful contributor to the school and particularly to the lives of young people.

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Biography

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